*Street Level Bureaucracy* (Lipsky, 1980): Managers vs. Workers

In public service systems, for example, worker compliance is influenced by the workers’ perceptions of the legitimacy of the managers’ orders. When orders are given by authorities who are not on the front lines to workers who are, it is not unusual for workers to resist them. There are underlying reasons behind the resistance. Lipsky (1980) explains that workers and managers in public service organizations have work-related objectives that differ from each other to the extent that worker resistance is not uncommon. Workers, burdened with very heavy caseloads, are concerned with client processing and maximizing their autonomy and discretion in completing their jobs; management is concerned with results, performance, and costs that might reflect on the organization as a whole and subject it to scrutiny (Lipsky, 1980). Therefore, managers might attempt change efforts aimed at restricting worker discretion, perhaps in order to maintain control over the organization.

While managers in these systems often realize that worker cooperation is needed if any organizational reform efforts are to succeed, it is not unusual for the workers to sabotage reform efforts by taking advantage of legal loopholes, perhaps in an effort to cling to their autonomy and ability to exercise the discretion they believe they need to complete their work in the field (Lipsky, 1980). Workers likely do not perceive management’s efforts to limit their autonomy and discretion as legitimate (Lipsky, 1980), given that the managers are not in the trenches. Therefore, workers resist reform aimed at restricting them. This perception perhaps has its roots in that the authorities furthest removed from the front lines are attempting to call the shots. Shared participation in decisions and reform efforts is absent from the workplace climate.

In public sector systems like social work or law enforcement, to name just two examples, Lipsky (1980) suggests that it is better to avoid “bureaucratic solutions to problems defined as worker deviation” (p. 207), and that it is helpful instead if decision making is shared: managers, supervisors, and other authority figures still make the very critical decisions and absorb the responsibility associated with those decisions, while “small units” (p. 207) make routine decisions that affect their ability to fulfill their day-to-day job demands. These small group units are arguably in the best position to judge which services should be “routinized” and which should remain “unprogrammed” (p. 207). “Decentralized units would be far more likely to develop routines consistent with responsive and efficient client treatment than authorities removed from the scene” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 207). The climate described here, where workers contribute to decisions that affect the way they will do their jobs, is healthier than one in which workers use loopholes to dodge reform efforts because they see their supervisors as too far removed from the field to be making decisions for them.